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A CALL TO WAR WORKERS

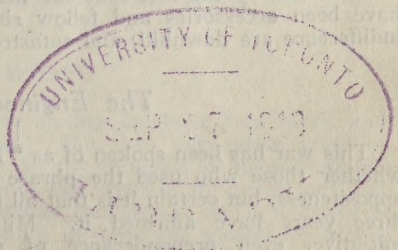
OF THE

ENGINEERING AND SHIPBUILDING INDUSTRIES

BY

F. H. ROSE

AMALGAMATED SOCIETY OF ENGINEERS



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TO THE WAR WORKERS OF THE ENGINEERING AND SHIPBUILDING INDUSTRIES.

THIS address is a call from the work bench. The writer is not a paid official of the State or the Trade Union, and has no ambition or intention to become either. Nor are these lines written for the small purposes of political faction or designed as a distraction of working class thought from abuses which exist in our midst, from wrongs which call for redress, or to beguile into complacent submission men and women whom a sense of injustice has stung into impatience and indignation. It is intended at once as an appeal and a warning from one industrial worker to his fellows, and is inspired by the single faith which raises the love of our country above the trumpery of party, of political creed, of social and industrial theory, and holds at least equality of place with conscience itself.

If it is directed, primarily, to some arousal of thought and action on the part of the organised skilled and semi-skilled workers in the Engineering and Shipbuilding industries, it is not because they alone have grown into the habit of regarding the war as a commonplace of national life, but because the quickening of their perceptions and energies is the essential need of the hour. If we have strayed in the way of indifference and disaffection, we are not the only nor the worst offenders. There is malingering in managerial offices and directors' board rooms as well as at the anvil, the vice-bench and the lathe. But the disconcerting truth is that, particularly during the past twelve months, production per head has dwindled, and energy has relaxed far beyond the limits assignable to physical weariness or even mental apathy. And our own responsibility is not lessened by the fact that our industrial directors and social superiors have been accessories and fellow sinners. The paths of lethargy and indifference are downhill, and catastrophe lies at the foot.

The Engineers' War.

This war has been spoken of as "The Engineers' War." It is doubtful whether those who used the phrase so glibly quite realised its singular appositeness, but certain it is that all the military developments of the past three years have affirmed it. Military science, soldierly valour and initiative, even preponderance of man power, are vanities without mechanism and machined steel in quantities which seem to baffle calculation; indeed, to challenge the thought that military conceptions have overleaped human possibility.

With so heavy a share of this responsibility upon our shoulders, with a full understanding of what perils slackness of effort in the workshop involves to our own flesh and blood in the battle front, there are those amongst us who counsel the setting of industrial grievances, sometimes of little magnitude and importance, before an obligation as sacred and appealing as that of straining every nerve and sinew to arm our sons and brethren against the enemy. It is an aggravation rather than a mitigation

of the wrong to urge that the evil example has been set by those who regard themselves as our betters.

I have heard men who aspire to, if they do not occupy, leading positions in the Labour world sneer at sympathetic references to our men in the trenches, and deride the suggestion that soldiers' lives are more precious than trade customs, and that the human liberty which may be secured with a victorious peace is a truer objective than a war bonus or a wages advance.

Let every reflective worker have regard to the first elementary fact in our national life to-day. We are in the throes of a life and death struggle with a ferocious, unscrupulous and treacherous foe. It is a struggle which means more than the life and death of nations; it means the life or death of civilisation, liberty and human progress. The cause and the conditions call for sacrifices by all orders of the community, demand faithful service, and exhort to every holy and righteous impulse. If we have had ignoble examples set us by some sections of the community we have not been without those which were better worth following.

As ever, the youth of our race has rallied to the flag, has given love and home and life and all that life means to the young and ardent for the immemorial ideal of our mission to the world. If love of our own country is held as a mere abstraction embodying only a dubiously pious maxim, then our sons and brothers are dying for an ideal which we do not regard as worth working for.

During the past twelve months especially the decadence of the skilled worker has been marked and manifest. There has been an absence of motive and a lack of enthusiasm; a disposition to get time in rather than to get work out. I do not think there will be many engineering workmen who will deny this Whatever extenuations may be offered—and there are many extenuations to offer—they will not justify an acquittal, even from our own consciences. The fact remains that we are not giving our best for a cause for which our soldier kinsmen are giving their all. If trade privileges and union regulations are more to us than the blood of our own begotten, a miracle only can bring a victory, and that a victory which we cannot claim to deserve and which will carry no blessing to our people hereafter. It is time that we ceased to bleat about our rights; more than time that we concerned ourselves with our duties.

Enemies Within.

As a rule, British workers have never needed and have been rarely and lightly impressed by moral preachments. But they have often erred in ignorance of the truth or under the perplexing influence of misunderstanding. In this case I believe that they have lost sight of the great fact that the production of the Machines and Metals Industry is the first essential factor of military victory. If we can keep in mind the central truth that war material production is our own obligation, we shall more readily realise that strikes and organised malingering are crimes against our native land and treason to humanity. The agents who, under any pretext, foment and encourage any deterrents to production are enemies within our gates, however specious their professions of disinterestedness, however eloquent and insistent their lip service to high ideals. There is some excuse for workmen who suffer from a sense of weariness or who entertain suspicions of the motives of rulers and employers, but none for men who exploit unrest and disaffection for unworthy ends.

During the course of this war, strikes, paltry enough in their objects, have done much to retard and embarrass this all-important production. Mismanagement and incapable direction have had quite as bad an effect. But out of sight the greatest deterrent has been workshop slacking, and beyond expression the worst and meanest, *deliberately organised "ca' canny."*

The intention of these pages is to direct the workers' attention to the character and extent of the influences which have operated with increasing force during the past twelve months. There is no desire or intention to incite to reprisal or to arouse a spirit of repression or vindictiveness. In many cases the advocates and even the proselytes of the Industrial Revolution are well-meaning enthusiasts. However arguable may be the tenets of what is styled Industrial Unionism, however lofty its ideals, it is no time to advance them while a cunning and brutal enemy is at our portals. To the best intelligences of the men and women who are engaged in this propaganda as well as to the uninstructed and impressionable workers who are influenced by them, this appeal is directed. To them, as to us all, there is but one interest, one object, one motive; to end this war in the only way it can be ended if humanity is to be freed from the deadly incidence of militarism and the intolerable menace of an Imperial Mailed Fist.

The Shop Steward Movement: Its Use and Abuse.

There is much public confusion of thought as to who and what are "shop stewards," and in what relation the great Trade Unions stand to what is known as "The Joint Engineering Trades Shop Stewards Committee." A much greater difficulty is involved in the curious fact that vast numbers—perhaps a majority—of union workmen are no better instructed nor more definite in their conceptions.

Shop Stewards are persons working in engineering establishments and appointed to certain clearly defined duties. Their election in most districts is by the workers in the shops; in others directly by the authorised District Committees. Their duties are to watch the detail interests of the operatives in their respective departments, and to report any alteration, encroachment, or innovation made or attempted by employers and their officials. But their authority begins and ends in the responsibility to the local governmental body which appoints them. They are paid a small quarterly fee on the written reports which they are obliged to submit. Acting within these properly prescribed limits, the shop stewards are useful, even necessary, agents of the Unions.

Shop stewards constitute a very recent addition to the recognised officialism of the Trades Unions. But the movement, commendable enough in itself, was obviously open to abuse. Shop stewards in various parts of the country formed committees declaredly for the purpose of mutual intercourse and conference and the exchange of views and information. Left to run loose and unguided, and obviously devoid of the sense of responsibility imposed by settled regulation or rule, they rapidly developed into centres of Industrial Syndicalist propaganda, and widened their operations until they became elements apart from and independent of the Unions. By degrees this association, self-appointed and totally unrepresentative, has assumed an authority and arrogance as intolerant as it is harmful to the Unions.

The grave indictment against this movement is not directed against it as a theory of industrial organisation. From that point of view neither analysis nor criticism is necessary here. The trouble is that men professing

to have the workers' interest and honour at heart should take advantage of their country's peril and extremity to promote a project which they must know to be provocative of the bitterest controversy and disunion, and this at a time when concentration of purpose and energy is the first essential guarantee of a world peace which all righteous men long for.

An appeal to the best spirits even in the ranks of Syndicalism to suspend at least their stimulus from what they choose to term the "*Expression of militant thought*"—which means in plain terms, from insidiously fomenting strikes and campaigns of calculated "ca' canny"—may not be altogether futile. But if that is so, the greater is the necessity of warning the mass of the workers against their solicitations. "Down tools" will not bring victory or the lasting peace it consummates; "ca' canny" is not the agent of social and industrial liberty.

For the legitimate shop steward movement there is little to be said which is not commendatory. It deserves all the kindly and fraternal help and guidance of the higher officialism of the Unions, and has, unfortunately, some cause to complain that this has not been much in evidence. But for men who steal its name and appropriate its machinery and divert its purposes and influence into dishonest and unlawful channels there is neither apology nor defence.

Pacifism and the Workers.

Honest Pacifism has as good a right to speak and to be heard respectfully as has the least compromising Militarist. Nobody is obliged to endorse the vagaries of either. It is the usurpation of honest names and rightful authorities that is intolerable. I do not pretend to be familiar with the inner workings of the contemporary Syndicalist Movement, but I know the workshop and the heart of its people as few living men know them. There may or may not be direct collusion between the various cliques of persons who parade as Pacifists and the Syndicalism which insidiously operates in the workshops and shipyards, proclaiming the "*Expression of militant thought.*" But those who attend the public meetings frequently held by the latter and who meet their apostles and missionaries in the union branches and committees detect a suggestive family resemblance in all their utterances. Out of it arises the curious idea that the war can and should be stopped by the workers stopping or retarding production of war material.

Yet even those in our midst who "have friends in Germany and intend to keep them" cannot offer any guarantee that German munition workers share this view or are in the least disposed to adopt it as a practical policy, or even that if it were universally adopted it would have the desired effect. The truth is that strikes and malingering merely prolong the war and seriously imperil the prospect of a tolerable peace.

Our Grievances.

It seems a pitiful thing that men should whimper about grievances at a time like the present. Workers in engineering shops and shipyards have not a single grievance which is not suffered by their poorer fellow citizens and their equals in a more intense form. We may have some right to complain of high prices, of rampant profiteering, of the incidence of exaggerated bureaucratic departmentalism, of unequal treatment of classes,

of governmental waste and official ineptitude. But these grievances are all national. Not one of them is sectional or peculiar to us.

Workshop conditions were never better than they are to-day. From the highest skilled artisan to the meanest labourer, workshop life is more dignified and respectable, though the work is perhaps more monotonous and prolonged than in normal times. It is not suggested that such a state is better than it should be, or that, realising it as every experienced workman must, it should silence the voice of protest against the wrongs which admittedly exist, and are suffered by our people in common with the rest of the workers. The plea is that neither strikes nor slacking will correct them and that "down tools" in any form will surely aggravate them. For it amounts to this; that by stopping or retarding the supply of indispensable material our brothers in arms are forced to relax their grip upon the throat of our enemy while we discuss "Dilution on Commercial Work," or "The Recognition of Shop Stewards," with the Chiefs of a State Department.

The clamour of civilian interests may be the inevitable concomitant of war, but we need not incur more than our share in the dire discredit of raising and intensifying it. Millions of our countrymen and women are making sacrifices which might well put the rest of us to shame. We have sacrificed a few workshop regulations of doubtful value and have exacted a promise to have them restored. There is nothing supreme about that. Those who cheerfully make the supreme sacrifice ask us only to work steadfastly to give them the means to make it not in vain. All our grievances in aggregate are but dust in the balance against the grievance which slacking and indifference in the workshop imposes upon them.

It is not within the writer's province to lecture the owners of controlled establishments. But they, too, have their grievances, which are just about as mean and paltry as our own. They, too, have made their sacrifices and have been quite as handsomely rewarded for their virtues. It is a melancholy fact that they, like their workers, are not playing the game. Most of them are as conscious of it as the majority of their employees, and just about as contrite.

It is possible that the man in khaki who has had to relinquish a good job and leave a wife and children, to wade waist deep in the mud of Flanders, carrying his life and a rifle in his hands, feels it a sort of grievance that he is there instead of at home, but it is not for him to complain. He cannot advertise his wrongs as we can. One can realise that the seamen of the Navy and the mercantile marine may not think it a grievance that their lives are hourly risked in the duty of keeping us fed, though they may regard it as somewhat unfair that those who are fed by their peril should think more of profits and war bonuses than of their grateful obligations to their protectors.

If the disaffection and indifference of workmen and employers in the essential industry of the war forces us into a peace dictated from Berlin or a peace based upon some diplomatic compromise there will be a very profound grievance for all classes to suffer. The hour it is signed will mark the beginning of preparations for another struggle, bloodier and more remorseless than this. There is not a Pacifist advocate who does not understand it. The League of Nations we hope for will, in that event, be no more than a conclave of hypocrites, speaking of love and plotting murder and treason.

To the workers an inconclusive peace means a perpetuation of military conscription and industrial chaos. There is no greater danger to the working class than a peace which leaves an autocrat's ambition for world dominion unshattered. The way may be hard, but it is the only way. The peace must be a victorious peace, giving equality to nations and freedom to peoples, secured by Public Right and International obligation.

Without Malice.

Those who seize upon the elements of workshop unrest and irritation and use them for ill purposes have much to answer for. If this appeal were written for the purposes of recrimination or reprisal a grave indictment could be made out against men who have sedulously fostered discontent in the factory, who have exaggerated petty irritants into intolerable grievances, who have misused the powers they have usurped to foment strikes which they had neither the ability nor the courage to lead but to disaster and humiliation. It is pertinent and timely to remind ourselves that, though the loss of life and the toll of human suffering involved in these organised deterrents to production can never be precisely computed, every hour of lost work has been paid for in blood tribute, and every lapse from workshop duty taxed in human suffering.

Our trade organisations may leave much to be desired, but they are our best protection yet. Their officials may be a poor lot, but we elected them and we are under some obligation to treat our own with as much respect as once we seem to have thought they deserved. The increasing audacity of the elected person is a burdensome thing, but the arrogance of the self-elected person is an intolerable infliction. And when our fellow citizens know that the fomenters of many of the strikes of the past three years and of most of the campaigns of deliberate "ca' canny" were men with no vestige of elective status, but merely apostles of Industrial Syndicalism, they may form a poor opinion of the character of the masses of Organised Labour who have been credulous enough to obey them.

A strike, under present circumstances, is a mean-spirited and wrongful act, systematic malingering is the act of a coward. For our credit and our country's sake let there be no more of this criminal folly. Our responsible representatives gave a public pledge, more than two years ago, that the right to down tools should be suspended during the war, and we endorsed that pledge without criticism or protest. It was a pledge to our countrymen as well as a compact with State officialism. In breaking that promise we degrade ourselves to the level of those we have denounced for regarding sacred treaties as "scraps of paper."

Warning.

A warning is due especially to those within the Syndicalist circle who are sincere industrial enthusiasts as yet untainted with the cynical treachery which prompts the minority. There are others amongst them who are unfaithful even to treason.

At a recent meeting, held in Manchester, under the auspices of the Joint Engineering Trades Shop Stewards Committee, the President, in opening the proceedings, made an impassioned appeal for funds. He candidly, if somewhat undiplomatically, attributed the parlous state of the finances of the movement to the fact that the stewards who made the collections at the numerous strike meetings last May had pocketed the coppers instead of paying them into the treasury. So much for character. We cannot afford to trust our industrial interests and honour to men whom we cannot trust with collection coppers.

Greater is the need for earnest words of warning to the rank and file of the organised workers to repudiate the solicitations of the advocates and missioners of this vicious movement. Whether it is connected, directly or indirectly, with other associations of men and women engaged in Pacifist

advocacy is not a consideration of much importance to us. It is secretive, except for such indiscreet lapses into candour as I have instanced; it is disingenuous and seditious, inimical to Trade Unionism in its best sense, and harmful above all to the cause our soldiers and seamen are fighting and dying for. It cannot help forward any honest and constitutional agitation against the industrial and political wrongs from which we suffer. It cannot rectify abuses or mitigate the effects of misgovernment and maladministration. Beyond its outworn cries of "Down tools!" and "Ca' canny!" it has no ideal and little inspiration. In some vague way, perhaps, the accumulated millions of the craft union funds present to the leaders a revealed El Dorado, open to possible exploitation if its present custodians can be beguiled into acquiescence.

To our fellow workers in allied lands this appeal is made as to our own workers. Revolutionary Trade Unionism is not peculiar to Great Britain. In America it has existed for at least half a century. The Knights of Labour and the Industrial Workers of the World have pursued their abortive activities at least since 1867. There is nothing to show for them all but disunion and discredit.

To us all in both Continents, there is one other phase of the Labour situation which we may remember with advantage. Military and naval success is dependent upon our productive energy and industrial application. We are the heirs of the pioneers and creators of our wonderful industry and the inheritors of their work and ingenuity. Our industrial ancestry is nobler and prouder than that of any living potentate. Newcomen, Watt, Crompton, Cartwright, Fulton, Hedley, Trevethick, Stephenson, Maudslay and a hundred others lengthen the roll of honourable names in the list of our nobility. Are we to allow a nation of imitators and inferiors to beat us in the field fertilised by our forerunners' toil and genius? We could not excuse defeat by whimpering about workshop grievances, or with the pusillanimous defence that other people were slacking, or that we thought the extremity of our country offered a fitting opportunity for securing industrial advantages or of promulgating some visionary scheme of organisation.

The road to victory can only be made by our unremitting labour, and solidified by our skill and devotion. To us it must be either worth doing or not. If we sulk and idle while the enemy works, the responsibility will be ours and the shame of defeat will lie heavily upon our class. But if it is worth doing, let it be done, and let neither the industrial faddist nor the sedition-monger deflect our energies from so worthy and honourable a purpose.

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